

'Classic' movies from the simple to the complex

(a 'random harvest' gathered by Paula James, Open University)

I decided the best approach to the potentially vast topic of the Classical World in the cinema was to plunge *in medias res* with a chronologically capricious 'tour' around one or two Classical Epics. I quickly realised that I would be hard pressed in the space of this article to cover films in Europe alone, which boast some kind of Classical orientation, especially as cinema history now spans well over a hundred years. So I decided to begin with a brief personal 'take' on movies that made a lasting impression on me. From that vantage point, however, I hope to give some flavour of the complexities of the interaction between a variety of Classical themes and the cinematic world.

Anyone of my generation who started going to the pictures in the 1950s comes to the subject of the Classical World on film with a certain amount of nostalgic baggage. The sheer spectacle of the Hollywood epics, from *Ben Hur* to *Spartacus*, never really loses its magic but it would be wrong to define the grandeur of these films too narrowly because they also boast an epic sententiousness which is precisely where a Millennium movie like *Gladiator* perhaps deliberately misses the mark. The film was a palpable hit with the public and I enjoyed it. However, I suspect that Russell Crowe (Maximus) was not encouraged to suffer on screen as monumentally as stars Heston or Douglas did in the context of their ethically coherent cinematic universes. *Gladiator* did not set out to be a film about big issues in the Roman Empire but in a quirky way it turned out to be *L.A. Confidential* writ large on the template of a very distant past, with Russell Crowe (albeit Australian) responding to corruption in the system with an American brand of heroic individualism. This was appropriate epic for the millennial era. In spite of Joachim Phoenix's bravura baddie, the actors and the narrative seemed to be marking time in between the film's action sequences and great 'set' pieces.

If I was not alone in getting the most enjoyment from the latter, this raises the uncomfortable question of slaughter and suffering as entertainment. One of the most memorable aspects of the Roman Empire in popular consciousness, the public punishment of the arena, was graphically recreated in *Gladiator* and provided spectator sport for the modern audience. This irony was not lost upon critics in the earlier era of the Hollywood epic, for past movie producers were as keen to promise the agony and ecstasy of a decadent Rome against breathtaking backdrops as they were to portray morally uplifting stories of faith and heroism. From *Sign of the Cross* to *Quo Vadis* and *Demetrius and the Gladiators*, Christians and lions risked becoming censorbait, with the message marginalised by the spectacle. (See Maria Wyke, *Projecting the Past*, 1997, p.137.)

In spite of my starting point, a celebration of two highly influential epics of the 50s and 60s, I cannot hand on heart say that they were significantly instrumental in steering me towards a study of the ancient world, (either for salacious or scholarly reasons!). The truth is that reading Charles Kingsley's *The Heroes* was my first and most influential close encounter with the Classical past. The Perseus legend intrigued me but it was not until Desmond Davis' film *Clash of the Titans* was on release some thirty years later that my favourite Kingsley hero was transmuted into Harry Hamlin ('wouldn't I look tasty in a cheesecloth shirt?'), co-starring Judi Bowker (where's the nearest gymkhana?) as Andromeda. I am rather glad in this particular case that the Victorian illusion of Perseus was not shattered for me at a tender age and that I was made of sterner stuff when I first saw the film, a production not even the Ray Harryhausen effects could save from mediocrity. *Jason and the Argonauts* (made 20 years before) was much more satisfying for Kingsley fans.

But here my prejudices are showing and it is interesting that this same film, *Clash of the Titans*, proved so fruitful as a teaching tool for Peter

Rose who wrote of student perceptions of expanded and suppressed *topoi* within its cinematic text and how, by contrasting the myth and mythemes portrayed in the movie with those apparent in Classical versions of the legend, he guided his students into the territory of 'interrogating their own cultural practices as well as those of a radically different society.' (Winkler ed. 1991, p.20). In short, and to state the obvious, we reveal as much about the tensions and complexities of our present when we presume to make sense or, less charitably, to make judgements on the past; which is why Maria Wyke (1997, p.3) provides the keynote question for my brief contribution here: she asks 'Is historical film, therefore, a proper object of study for Classicists? And should cinema have a place in the investigation of antiquity's reception?'

In relation to this, let me return to *Gladiator* and the experience of Open University students on the Level One course *Introducing the Humanities* who found much of interest in a film which 'reconstructed' the very building, the Colosseum, they were studying from a sociological and architectural perspective in the 'Classics' block of the course. According to the student conference website they were searching the cinematic illusion for non-supporting pillars and numbered entrances! And as they worked through their final Block, a cultural brainstorming on the 1960s, I encouraged students at Summer School to identify the very distinct preoccupations of Mann's 1964 *Fall of the Roman Empire*, (*FRE*) which covers the same historical period as *Gladiator*. There is both homage and rivalry towards its predecessor in the way *Gladiator* director Ridley Scott moves the action from the grim Imperial frontiers to the magnificent effete-ness of the eternal city – but there are big differences. As Winkler observes (1995, p.144) *FRE* was an intelligent attempt at making history the hero and was hence criticised at the time for having no central heroic figure whose actions could cause a corrupt empire to fall.

Contextualising this view of the 1964 epic, Maria Wyke (OU video for the third level Roman Empire course) identifies within this film such contemporary (60s) issues as 'policing' peace, overseeing a 'community of nations' and articulating an increasingly fragile hope that there could be an enlightened use of power when the world was constantly on the edge of nuclear war.

FRE departed from its epic predecessors because its director, Anthony Mann, knew that plucky Christians fighting the godless oppressor as a paradigm for the pious West fighting the evil empire of Communism was becoming problematic. It was more now a question of how an empire (Roman or American) could be a champion of peaceful co-existence, a wish expressed in the hopeless dream of Alec Guinness's dying Marcus Aurelius. Mann himself cited the parallels to contemporary America and revealed his agenda 'to make his film as modern as possible so that it could be related to any society; so that people would understand.' (Winkler, 1995.p.143).

In fact, this kind of uneasy relationship between Rome and America had been explored years before, albeit in a quirky and unexpected form. Gore Vidal in *Screening History* (1993) reminisces about watching the Depression musical comedy, *Roman Scandals*, (1933) a vehicle for ebullient Eddie Cantor who is transported to ancient Rome to encounter the same heartlessness and corruption he has experienced in his home town. Maria Wyke (1997, p.1) uses Vidal's reflections (with hindsight) upon the film to demonstrate how 'cinematic representations of history have also addressed the concerns of the present.' *Roman Scandals* can be viewed as an early articulation about the distortion of an American dream; the fear that the idealised model of a nation born with a morally sturdy Republican *Romanitas* was moving in historical step towards the

decadence and cruelty of Rome under the emperors. (see Wyke's discussion on p.27 for further fascinating and less straightforward equations within the film).

This brings us on to the richness of Roman resonances across the board. Maria Wyke (p.7) approvingly quotes Beard and Henderson (1995) who argued that a newly conceived Classics welcomes as its objects of study 'the imaginative entertainments and instructive recreations of Greece and Rome which are to be found on the page, stage and celluloid of popular cultural production.' So it would seem, in answer to Maria Wyke's question about the legitimacy of the silver screen as a player in the reception of the Classics, that the case has been made and won for both teaching and researching the Classical world through cinematic reincarnations. After all, as noted earlier, film now has over a century of its own history to celebrate.

Both Wyke (1997) and Solomon (1978) explore a fascinating array of very early cinematic treatments of Classical, quasi-Classical and Biblical subjects frequently filtered through established historical novels which provided the narrative, and cinematically visualised with the help of 19th century high art painting. The message of both books, Solomon's a broad survey, Wyke's a sophisticated critique of how Hollywood and Italy resurrected Rome and its Empire to address their own society's concerns and contradictions, is that Cinema must claim its rightful place in the post Classical cultural continuum. We should not underestimate the complexity of the dialogue film conducts sometimes freshly and directly with the ancient world but more often mediated by the perceptions and reconfigurations of that world through centuries of literary and artistic predecessors.

Alongside, Hollywood style historical epic and the Sword and Sandals 'musclemen' productions we could also cite the (mainly European) art house alternatives which opened the door for a more aesthetically respectable dialogue, a place where one could analyse how great Classical texts (mostly tragedies) have translated to film. (e.g. Pasolini's versions of *Oedipus* and *Medea*, Cacoyannis' Trojan trilogy, and more recently Harrison's *Prometheus* – post classical reworkings of Greek drama such as these have been subjected to critical scrutiny within the broader remit of the Reception Project in the Open University Classical Studies Department) Finally, returning to the 21st century we have the Coen Brothers' characteristically unsustainable *homage* to Homer's *Odyssey*, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*. (reviewed in *CA News*, June 2001 by Philip Hooker, along with other Classically allusive films.)

All my discussion and examples so far have concentrated upon films that unambiguously take up familiar Classical material (usually the stuff of historical narrative or legends and myth) and set about interpreting and refiguring it. Does there come a point when Classicists might seem to be crossing a bridge too far in making connections between cinema and the Classical world? There have been increasingly bold attempts to explore classical motifs and blurred boundaries between genres, using films that are to all intents and purposes thoroughly 'modern' and where no Classical interest or influence has been explicitly signposted. In 1991 Martin Winkler edited his already cited book of essays which ranged from explorations of tragic topoi in John Ford's *The Searchers* (Winkler) to *Chinatown* as an American tragedy (Mary-Kay Gamel) and *9 to 5* as Aristophanic comedy (James R. Baron).

In Winkler's *Classical Myth and Culture in the Cinema* (Oxford 2001) some of these pieces have been reprised and some intriguing and entertaining critiques have been added, for instance Hanna M. Roisman's 'Verbal Odysseus: Narrative Strategy in the *Odyssey* and *The Usual Suspects*'. (Elsewhere, Roisman has written on 'Tiresias and Obi-Wan: Outside the Scope of the Plot' and on 'Predestination in Early Greek Literature and the *Terminator* films.') and Janice F. Siegel's 'Peter Greenaway's *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*: a Cockney Procne.' Beyond this book and lending even more gravitas to the 'Classicising' process, Waswo in *From Virgil to Vietnam* (1997) takes Virgilian Aeneas as the definitive founding hero who informs the legend of perpetual colonisation and discusses in his final chapters the epic as

history in John Ford's Westerns, adding another dimension to films in which Winkler has found the features of Classical tragedy.

I am very sympathetic towards expanding the horizons of intertextuality and broadening our definition of what is 'classical' on film. I include some of my published efforts in the select bibliography. I have also given papers on Ovid's *Pygmalion* at the cinema, with a special focus on Hitchcock's *Vertigo* and the idealisation of banefully synthetic women. (Hitchcock is a great inspirer of aesthetic, psychological and philosophical McGuffins; for the latter try reading Tom Cohen (1994) on 'Hitchcock and the death of (Mr) Memory' in his *Anti-Mimesis from Plato to Hitchcock*.) At present I am working on the resonances of the myth of Pandora in Aldrich's 50s' film of Mickey Spillane's *Kiss Me Deadly*.

These are just some of the elusive dialogues we can conduct, and of course we control them, between classical myths and motifs and the movies we identify as in some way echoing or reprising them. The human dilemmas (social and personal) that the myths can painfully explore are part of their universal timbre but direct lines from mythemes to movie directors are less easy to demonstrate. While recognising the essence and essentiality of Classical themes we do not want to travel old elitist roads in our genuine enthusiasm for and promotion of our subject. Perhaps it is time for the Classics to take its place in the cultural continuum, with the emphasis on 'continuum'! In her recent book, *Pygmalion and Galatea: The history of a narrative in English literature*. Essaka Joshua comments pertinently on Elizabeth Hayes' reading of *The Bluest Eye* in terms of the Persephone myth. Joshua (p.xiii) notes that Toni Morrison, the author, denied that she consciously set out to write a reenactment of the Persephone story and Hayes 'falls back on the assumption that the myth must have affected the author subliminally. In effect, Morrison's mind is colonised by this implicitly superior culture.' Hayes argues that 'archetypes can operate subliminally, through the unconscious, as well as through rational thought: that is precisely what gives them their astounding resonance, their numinosity.' But, Joshua concludes that 'this kind of approach appropriates the [modern] work to such a degree as to abrogate the cultural identity of the author.'

However, I am quite shameless in seeing Ovidian topoi at every turn and am quite unable to leave well alone in this respect. I have entitled my work on *Pygmalion* 'She's All That – Or is she? Ovid's Ivory Maiden and her Tarnished Sisters at the Cinema' partly because *She's All That* is the title of the most recent film version of the *Pygmalion* story but principally because I have yet to read or see a reworking of this myth that has no trace of Ovid's ambiguous *Eburna* within it. This is not because Ovid (*pace, vates*) could predict every possible variation such a story was likely to contain in the centuries ahead of him but because he touched upon some perennial preoccupations that such a piece of 'womanufacture' (to borrow Alison Sharrock's term) was bound to conjure up. On reflection, I have realised that my reading of Ovid has been enriched by my encounter with modern cinematic texts such as *Vertigo*, so it is by no means a one way process when we use one text as an interpretative tool for another.

I would say that it is important to validate the modern medium of cinema as a way of enriching our interpretation of ancient texts and their subtexts. A fruitful investigation is forging ahead; into the present's representation of the past and how modernity is simultaneously struggling to (re) define its own social identity and contemporary cultural consciousness. We should also heighten awareness of another process; how cinematic narratives are capable of revealing remoter truths within ancient texts, frequently without the benefit of specialist scholarly rigour, but often with the advantage of the long shot across centuries that have developed and distilled perceptions evident in the Classical past. And that could be the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

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Britannia delenda est!

Simon Scarrow

I was asked by the *JACT Review* editor to write an article on the Roman army as I have chosen to represent it in my first two novels, *Under The Eagle* and *The Eagle's Conquest*. As some of you may know, the novels are the first in a new series which will follow the adventures of a teenage recruit, Quintus Licinius Cato, who joins the Second Legion late in 42 AD. This was the unit commanded by Vespasian, who later became emperor. Cato arrives fresh from Rome – a quiet, sensitive lad with a love of literature and history, and I think it's fair to say he's totally unprepared for the harsh reality of army life. Cato joins the century

commanded by Lucius Cornelius Macro, a veteran who has recently been promoted to the rank of centurion. Naturally, there's not much common ground between the two at the start of the novel. But in time, after a few months of skirmishing with the local Germans, Macro and Cato develop a grudging respect for each other. Then Vespasian drops a bombshell: the Second Legion is to be uprooted from its base and join an army massing for the invasion of Britain.

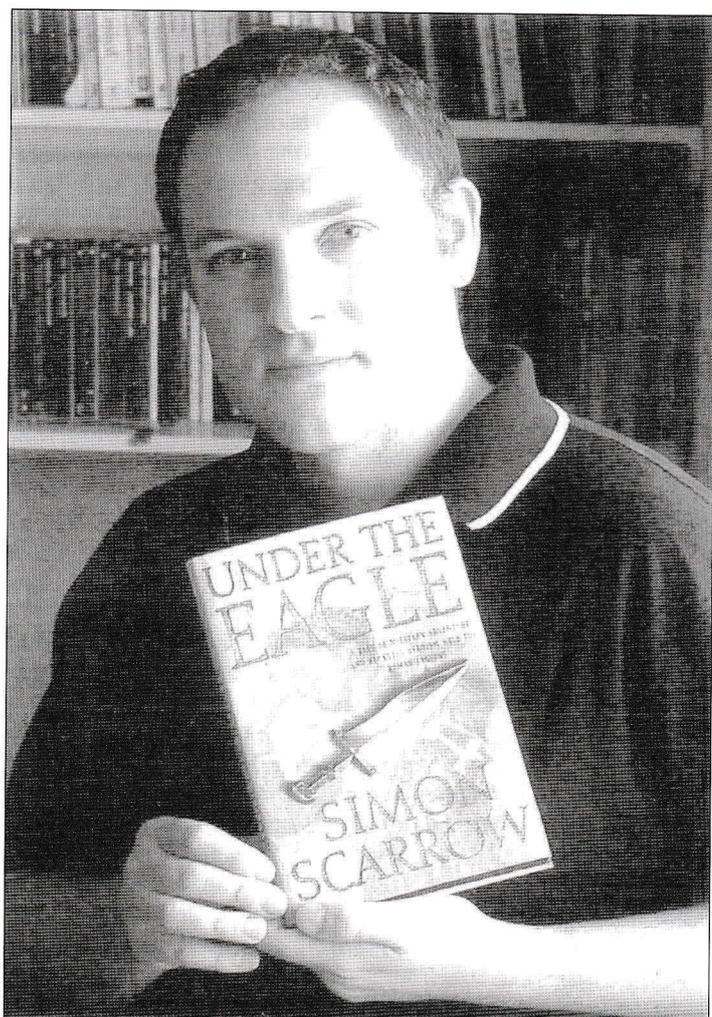
Under The Eagle, The Eagle's Conquest, and the third novel – currently titled *When The Eagle Hunts* – follow the Claudian conquest of Britain. As the series extends there's plenty more action for Cato and Macro to get involved in. The Romans were an incredibly violent lot and hardly a year went by without them going out and doing great violence to some poor barbarians. If sufficient barbarians were not available, then they'd do great violence to each other. So Cato and Macro will be involved in the Boudiccan revolt, the civil war of 69 AD, which resulted in the accession of 4 emperors in one year, and the Jewish revolt and siege of Masada.

Now the purists among my readers might protest that the Second Legion never left Britain for over a century after 43AD, so how could Cato and Macro serve in Judea? My answer to that is there's plenty of evidence that centurions served in a variety of units during their careers – as you can see from their career summaries on tombstones. Also, I plead the writer's perennial prerogative of poetic licence.

The Historical Fiction readership are pretty unforgiving, so in order for the books to succeed it was vital that I carried out detailed research into the Roman army so that I could represent it accurately, and more importantly make it feel real for the reader. To show you how I went about this I think it's best to divide the rest of this article into three sections.

Why did I want to write about the Roman army?

From a young age I was fascinated by the representation of Rome in films like *The Robe*, *Ben Hur*, *Spartacus*, *Cleopatra* and *The Fall of the Roman Empire*. Almost all of these films featured the men of the legions yet I always felt somehow cheated of the essential experience of what life was like in the Roman army. Where was the worm's eye view? (*Gladiator*; great movie that it is, takes us only a little closer to that experience). Then one day, I was watching an astonishing American TV series called *Masada*. I'm afraid it suffered from the usual Hollywood casting malady whereby the heroic Jewish freedom fighters were played by Americans and the bad guys – the Roman army – were represented by moonlighters from the RSC. While the rebels sat down over a cosy meal, debating the finer points of liberation theology, down below the rock of Masada a fascinating depiction of Roman army life unfolded. I was



astonished by the attention to detail in the uniforms and apparatus of the legionaries. Better still, a subplot of the series followed a small group of common soldiers through the terrible conditions of the siege. The soldiers were covered in grime, spoke in a reassuringly laddish fashion and drank and whored to excess. Their centurions and other officers were veterans, utter professionals with deeply lined faces that spoke of vast experience in a harsh way of life. It was a brilliant piece of casting and the depiction of life in the ranks of the Roman army has yet to be bettered. I'd like to think that one day Carlton television might do the Cato novels as much justice as they've done the Sharpe novels. Watch this space.

So, inspired by *Masada*, I began to read up on the Roman army, treading a well worn route through Peter Connolly's *Greece and Rome at War*, John Peddie's books on the Roman army and Claudian invasion of Britain, and ultimately esoteric collections of source material like Bruce Campbell's *The Roman Army 31 BC to 321 AD*. As I was reading this material it was clear that the men of the legions were absolutely fascinating for a number of reasons.

Firstly, the degree of organisation in the Roman army was unprecedented. Unlike the peoples they waged war against the Roman army was a highly professional body which paid relentless attention to training and discipline. Josephus, a Jewish general captured and befriended by Vespasian, wrote that the Roman army's training exercises were like bloodless battles and their battles were like bloody training exercises. Unlike their enemies, the vast majority of Roman legionaries were volunteers, with good reasons to volunteer. Good pay, healthy living conditions and the prospect of considerable financial and social rewards should they achieve the rank of centurion and beyond. They served in legions with proud traditions and revered their eagle standards in much the same way that regimental colours are cherished in the modern

Secondly, beyond the battlefield the legionaries were adept in a range of other functions and were responsible for much of the infrastructure of the Roman empire. The built roads, bridges, aqueducts, vast public buildings in newly acquired provinces. Equally impressive are the range of fortresses and fortifications; Hadrian's wall being a well known example. Legions had to be as self-sustaining as possible, both on the march but more importantly when in a garrison situation. Accordingly the ranks of the legions included a bewildering array of professions: carpenters, brick makers, farriers, armorsmiths, cartwrights, architects, glass-makers, water-pipe makers, plumbers, metal-workers, stone-cutters and horse-trainers. They farmed the surrounding lands and sold their surplus crops, manufactured and sold pottery and bricks to outside building contractors and so on. When we consider how strange it feels for us today to see the British army being employed in the role of an emergency fire service I think when we compare this to the Roman legions the world has yet to see their equal in self-sustainability.

Thirdly, there was the thoroughness with which they waged war. You only have to look at the amazing scope of Caesar's siege lines at Alesia to be aware of the detailed preparation that his army made to receive the enemy attacks. Again at Masada; a supposedly impregnable fortress rising some 300 metres from its surroundings with sheer drops on nearly all sides. The solution taken by the Romans was to reduce a nearby hill and use the rubble to construct a ramp up one side of Masada so that a siege tower could be brought against the fortress walls. All done by hand.

Moreover, the Romans had a tenacity that strikes me as verging on the fanatic. Once, when they were preparing to lay siege to a city, the city's leaders emerged for preliminary negotiations and smugly informed the Roman commander that they were well prepared for the siege and had laid in ten years supply of food. The Roman commander simply shrugged and replied in that case the Roman army would take the city a day after the tenth year had passed. Such was the Roman army's reputation for completing its operations that the city in question surrendered the next day.

Finally, there was the degree to which the Roman army was involved in Roman politics. The early emperors were no fools and in order to prevent army commanders building up power bases out in the provinces the

commanders of the legions were in office for very limited periods of time, but just long enough to make their CVs look good. Alternatively army command was entrusted to compliant relatives who could be trusted not to use the power to settle differences within the family. Other methods were used to guarantee the emperors' hold over the army. Some were subtle, like the striking of coins depicting the emperor alongside his soldiers, or the erection of statues depicting the emperor dressed for war. In time the emperors referred to the men of their legions as comrades in all official communications, rather than preserving the distinction between themselves and the legions as Augustus had preferred.

Some methods were less subtle, like the donative system, where Roman emperors disbursed huge payments to their armies on coming to power and whenever a politically sensitive situation arose. When Scribonianus tried to raise a revolt against Claudius, the emperor simply bribed the troops right out from under him. The emperors also conferred a wide range of legal privileges upon soldiers and nearly always took their side in any disputes between the army and the natives of the provinces, or even the common citizens in Rome itself. This highly charged aspect of Roman army life is one I've placed at the heart of my depiction of the legions.

The research for the novels.

There are a surprising number of books and journals devoted to the Roman army. We have some interesting contemporary accounts by the likes of Josephus, Onasander and Vegetius, as well as the mass of modern accounts. As mentioned earlier, I started with Peter Connolly's *Greece and Rome at War*, a clearly written history with a definitive line of description that is very reassuring. Neat diagrams and schemes made the Roman army look utterly efficient and uniform in every respect right across the empire. It was a great read the first time round, and every time since.

But although Connolly provides a nice overview of the military situation I found myself desiring a more detailed account of the practicalities of army life. Fortunately, there has been a huge output of material in this area in recent years. What has been particularly useful to me as a writer has been the trend towards a more functional account of the Roman army. For example, experimental archaeologists and other historians are now conducting practical experiments in demonstrating how many draft animals were required for a legion on the march, and how much pasture that implies. The historian I found most useful in this respect was Brigadier John Peddie, who died recently. I read both his account of the structure of the Roman army, as well another book on the first phases of the Claudian invasion. The reason why Peddie is so useful is that he served as an infantry officer in the Indian army in the Second World War and had first hand knowledge of the realities of marching alongside pack animals.

Accordingly, he has calculated that a legion would have required 1675 pack animals and would need 20,000 pounds of grain a day to feed the men and their pack animals. When you stop to think about the implications of these figures you begin to realise that the Roman army could only have operated on the basis of a well organised logistics corps and general staff, who rarely get a mention in most descriptions of the Roman army.

Other research was more geared towards the specific matter of the invasion of Britain itself. It's interesting to note that while Peddie devotes 80,000 words to the invasion, he constructs his account largely on the extrapolation of information given in the only surviving Roman account of the invasion, namely that of Cassius Dio, who describes the whole campaign in around 800 words. While this provides a big problem for historians it is manna to historical novelists. Thanks to Dio's sketchy and often ambiguous account of the Claudian invasion I have been given a high degree of latitude in the way I can describe the invasion.

Perhaps the most useful book I encountered while researching for the series is Brian Campbell's *The Roman Army 31 BC to AD 337*. It's a source book that provides a wonderful variety of soldier's letters home, soldier's pay records, unit strength returns, tombstone inscriptions and so on. What's fascinating about this book, are the small details. For

example, I never even thought that the Roman army might have dog tags, but he argues they did, in the form of a small sealed lead tube hung from a thong around the legionary's neck. Now it's that kind of detail that makes it into a novel, and lends it the authority to make the depiction come alive for a reader.

How I developed my vision of the Roman army for 'Under The Eagle'
Having gone over the sources pretty thoroughly I was left with one final problem; how to present the soldiers to the reader. The biggest challenge, to be honest, was not mastering the details, but making the Roman soldiers sound right. That is I had to make them actually sound and behave like soldiers. And here I must acknowledge the final resource used to breathe life into Cato, Macro and the other men of the Second Legion.

At school I had nursed the idea of joining the army at some stage, and at university I joined the Officer Training Corps. This proved to be an invaluable experience. Within a short space of time it became very clear that the OTC was a very different social group from the other Territorial units. Our unit was made up of a mix of Cambridge and University of East Anglia students, highly educated, mostly from comfortable backgrounds who found mixing with the men of the normal Territorial units something of a chore. The parallels with relations across the ranks in the Roman army must have been fairly similar and I decided to make this a prominent feature of my representation of the Roman army in *Under The Eagle*.

But most significant of all was my memory of the NCOs. Those guys have the world's largest reservoir of crude invective, delivered at top volume right into the face of the hapless recruit standing at the best approximation of attention on the parade ground. To be honest I loved every minute of it. It's the kind of display you would pay good money for. When I started the first novel it occurred to me that the nature of the business is the same now as it has ever been, and I made a very conscious decision to deploy the other ranks argot of late twentieth century in the legions of the first century. And you know what? It worked! Virtually every reviewer and reader who has written to me has praised the immediacy of my legionaries. Some people have complained about the amount of swearing I use in *Under The Eagle* and *The Eagle's Conquest*, but I promise you I have severely cut the swearing back from what it would be in reality. I'd guess that between a quarter and a third of all words used by NCOs and squaddies are profanities of one kind or another, but if you put that in a novel no one would believe you. To conclude, I'd just like to apologise for that one quite blatant inaccuracy in my novels.

Simon Scarrow is the author of the 'Eagles' novels featuring centurion Macro, Optio Cato and the Second Legion. Having been blessed with excellent classics teachers at school he has a lifelong fascination with the ancient world. At the moment he lectures in Media Studies at City College in Norwich. For more information about his novels you can visit his website at www.scarrow.fsnet.co.uk

Roman Sewers I have known (or reasons not to work in Field Archaeology) *Ian Stewart*

I have been invited to recount some experiences I have encountered as an archaeologist in my wanderings in Roman Britain and I have wandered in some places I can tell you.

Some of these experiences include Roman sewers and I have had the privilege (?) of working on two of the finest in the country. So if you want to talk about Roman sewers, I'm your man!

It was the autumn/winter of 1972/1973 – it must have been the season for Roman sewers – at two separate locations, Piercebridge on Tees, the Roman fort of *Morbio*, and York, the Roman legionary fortress and colony of *Eboracum*.

The sewers were interesting constructions, different though serving the same functions. It certainly indicated to me the Roman army fixation on hygiene. The army may have marched on its stomach but you had to do something with the contents afterwards!

Both sewers posed interesting problems to the archaeologists and as you can imagine an occasional source for humour (yes, I think I can laugh about it, nearly thirty years later!)

The first sewer, at Piercebridge, which we began digging in those long ago autumn 1972 days (when you could still get four pints of beer for a pound) proved to be one of the longest stretches ever found. Well worth a visit!

It also stands out for other reasons you will read later. The construction runs the length of the fort interior, on the east side. It is diverted through the Roman latrines in the NE corner of the fort, picks up drains entering into it from the bathhouse in the SE corner before emptying into the river Tees. Interestingly, the civil settlement where the local population was located is downstream – obviously the Roman military concern for hygiene efficiency did not extend outside the fort gates! It could have been a close encounter of the turd kind! What else do you expect – I am writing this article for free you know!

It must have been a very efficient sewer – unfortunately no interesting artefacts or ecofacts (look it up for yourselves!) were found. I suspect the Piercebridge stream during part of the Roman occupation was diverted through the sewer and kept everything flowing smoothly. What we archaeologists found was lots of lovely black soil onto which the local gardening fraternity descended on with great gusto. During the next summer's excavations we were presented with presents of some of the biggest tomatoes I have ever seen!

Before moving on down the Roman Dere Street to York (check the OS map of Roman Britain – this is not a lecture on Roman Britain) I want to recount a merry tale of what happens when there is an unfortunate clash between third century Roman Britain and late twentieth century Britain – at least in world of sewers.

It all began, one crisp autumnal Saturday, when I was working along with some fellow diggers emptying out the sewer of this obviously fertile (for tomato plants anyway) black soil, when one of my colleagues commented on the fact that for a Roman sewer the soil was smelling remarkably fresh – not to put too fine a point on it. I agreed and called over the director, who full of cold and a propensity for smoking cigars after sniffing the air (outside the sewer I might add!) promptly declared it was our imagination and went back to his office.

By this time, the crisp autumnal Saturday had turned into a rather damp drizzly one. (Whoever said that archaeology was romantic subject had never worked in a wet muddy Roman sewer on a now wet autumnal day).

The smell remained strong and the tempers got shorter especially after one of the diggers shouted across, "Hey Ian, I never knew Romans used pink toilet paper!" After hurrying across I looked at the offending fragment, at arms length, on the end of a shovel; noticing the heavy, albeit urgent sarcasm in my colleague's comment and the sense of unease (and

something else perhaps) in the air. In case we found any ecofacts (have you not checked it out yet?) I promptly dragged the boss outside again who had to admit defeat after blue dye was tipped down the nearest modern sewer manhole only to reappear a few minutes later in the bottom of the Roman sewer. The modern sewer had been originally laid across the Roman one, and the inevitable happened. (Subsidence then cracking – the rest I leave to your imagination). There is a moral there somewhere but I can assure you we were not thinking about morals at the time. The modern sewer, as with the Roman one before that, has been now diverted somewhere else.

Anyway enough of this diverting story and onto pastures new, approximately 4 metres down below the pavement of Church Street, York. It is not a story for the weak of heart (or mind) – you have been warned!

It was the fortnight before Christmas – I think! All was hustle and bustle above ground; the streets were thronging with people (whatever that means); it was also hustle and bustle below as well.

A major discovery had been made (yes, you've guessed it), another Roman sewer – which was quite fruitful in yielding up artefacts and yes, I believe ecofacts.

Enter, a young archaeologist from the North claiming experience in such matters who offered the benefit of his vast experience in sewage matters both ancient and modern.

Duly accepted (little did I know!) I was introduced to the perils of Roman sewer excavation in York. Think of digging an escape tunnel on the film *The Great Escape* without the German guards – instead we had tourists asking whether we had found any gold or bodies, and that gives you some idea what it was like.

We were in the novel position of having another excavation taking place above us – on a Roman bathhouse, whilst we were following a stone lined tunnel beneath them. The tunnel was approximately 1.5m high by 1.2m wide and three quarters filled with very interesting silts.

The silt, for want of a better word, was dug out by hand, loaded into buckets and dragged along the passageway on a trolley. (No prizes for where the inspiration for that idea came from!) After sieving, the silts yielded a most interesting collection of artefacts and ecofacts (it's that word again!) Finds included pottery, coins, jewellery (the only gold I have ever found on an excavation), intaglios, and bone gaming pieces, together with some interesting environmental evidence which included grain pests, indicating that the Romans were having problems in that area also. At the time we also thought we had found sponge fragments – the Roman equivalent of toilet paper. (At least it wasn't pink!) It later transpires that these sponge fragments were parts of a fossil sponge. Immediately thinking it was some form of obscure form of Roman corporal punishment to use a fossil sponge, I was duly informed that the fossil fragments had been washed out of a fragment of limestone that was common to the York area! On a further note about sponges, I believe a genuine fragment of sponge was found at another location in York but that is another story.

The reason for all this interesting material became all too clear to the archaeologists. The rivers at York are tidal, and the silts were backing up in the main tunnel because of tides and the infamous flooding of the York flood plain. The result of this being some unfortunate individual had to go down and clear the mess out periodically. Whereas this person had to do it on a regular basis back in the time of Roman York, we only had to do it once and in the name of science. What the Romans would have thought of our scientific research I again leave to your imagination – a very powerful tool for archaeologists.

Incidentally we were having the same problem as the Romans; hence the use of pumps and various other paraphernalia, which included electric light bulbs which tended to overheat and blow up just as you were crawling past them. Where the main sewer met the bathhouse drain we located the Roman manhole entrance – it was the only place in the sewer complex you could stand upright in!

The sewer as a whole (no pun intended, honest!) was an extremely impressive piece of engineering; each block of stone (millstone grit) was

calculated to have weighed 3.5 tons. Remember this was under 4m of archaeology and buildings above – we didn't think about it that much – we just thought it was fun and interesting working on the project (I was only 16 at the time!) It was also about this time of my life that I realised I was not claustrophobic, especially after you read the next passage. (Groan!)

Just when you think working conditions could not have got more cramped they did! Leading off from the main sewer, we found a series of passages about half the dimensions of the main one and yes we excavated them. How? By sliding on our stomachs, scooping up the silt, dumping it in buckets and dragging it out backwards face down. This was carried out by feel rather than seeing, though we had torches – there was no room for the light bulbs! Where were the passages leading us – to small square chambers we could at least sit up in? By looking up we quickly found the function of the chambers and the passages, for in the ceiling slab of each chamber was a neatly cut oval hole – choked up with stone debris by now, in one instance part of a column. We had found ourselves in the unique position of looking up from the Roman equivalent of the bottom of the toilet bowl! I suppose all of the passages and channels had to be built to enable individuals to clean it out, presumably slaves who had no say in the matter – we were all volunteers!

All of these discoveries, had to be recorded in some way and some novel ways were conceived to overcome the cramped conditions. This included devising a surveying table, which could be used in the sewer so that we could work out the fall of the passage and as an aid to drawing elevations of all – and I mean **all** of the passages.

One novel memory (amongst many!) is finding myself flat on my back at the end of the latrine passages, in the toilet chamber taking photographs of the underside of a Roman toilet seat – 4m below the pavements of York. I found myself thinking, "I bet no archaeologist could be as lucky as I am right now"!

Many new discoveries were made during the excavation, for example we were able to plot the locations of walls which ran over the top of the sewer – everywhere where they crossed over the sewer, the sewer had a load bearing arch measuring the same width, presumably as the wall. We also discovered that the Romans had the same problems as we have today with the flooding at York.

It was very worthwhile project, though the bathhouse, which we discovered above, was backfilled with sand and a concrete cap built over. There are shops built over that also. Over the entrance we made to the Roman sewer a modern manhole has been built, so it is possible to still gain access with special permission. The modern manhole cover is outside set in the pavement, in Church St, York. There hasn't been a mad rush to get access to this remarkable find. Though I believe it's half full of water from the river and there are rats in the sewer, so perhaps it's understandable why!

This sewer is the same one that was featured on the TV programme: *What did the Romans ever do for us*. I noticed however that on this occasion they sent down a remote controlled camera – how times have changed!

Some of the discoveries, including a gold earring, which I recovered, are now on show at the York St Mary's Museum in the park. The York Archaeological Trust has published the report. Photographs depicting archaeologists in various poses in the sewer (scientific recording poses – honest . . .) appear in several books (archaeology ones!)

The excavation took place over a couple of weeks either side of a very cold and wet Christmas in grim conditions but it was fun (?) My suggestions before the Christmas break, for decorating the light bulbs in the sewer in more festive colours was not well received. Even less well received was my suggestion as to where we could stick the director's Christmas tree (if you must know it, well no, I am not saying on this occasion, work it out for yourselves). As for Christmas bonuses, I believe we all went down with gastric flu, shortly after the dig finished.

We had the good fortune to meet up with TV personalities; yes we were famous for a while. Namely two, Valerie Singleton of *Blue Peter*,

who got the personal tour of the part of the sewer that was excavated, as badges were duly dished out. It felt like a campaign medal. I also had the privilege of meeting Sir Mortimer Wheeler for the one and only time. The great man told of his experiences as an army officer/archaeologist working under the Balkerne Gate, with aid of lighted candles. This was shortly before he was shipped off to the western front and to the 1914-1918 nightmare. I was duly humbled. It was the only time I met the man, but he left a powerful impression.

These accounts have been edited and some names have been changed or left out to protect the guilty. Some parts will never be revealed. Everything else is correct, the whole sordid experience. The season of

the sewers was never repeated and I have never been down another since – in the last 29 years! (You wonder why?)

For anyone who feels the urge, to count up the number of awful jokes and quips, feel free to do so – it was written for free. You may compile any lists you may like and dispose of the lists in the appropriate manner. Clue: The place of disposal is mentioned in the text.

Dr Ian Stewart teaches archaeology at Canterbury College. He is widely experienced in British archaeology, and believes keenly that we should convey a sense of fun along with learning.

Words : Words : Words *Herbert H Huxley*

On a nobleman who failed to sexercise caution:

Emptam dedit venerem
Diviti puella.
Ille fuit nobilis,
Illa satis bella.

Fama nunc miserrima
Laedit amatorem;
Namque moecha perfida
Vendidit emptorem.

A rich man bought sex from a girl. He was a nobleman; she was pretty stunning. Now a most wretched fate ruins the lover, for the treacherous tart has sold the man who bought her.

N.B. This epigram is based on an Under Secretary linked with call girls Norma Levy and Kim Pinder in the nineteen-seventies.

(Ed. note: the title above was originally due to my typing error; but the penultimate word seems most appropriate and has been allowed to stay.)

The Force of Habit

A tail behind, a trunk in front
Complete the usual elephant.
The tail in front, the trunk behind,
Is what you very seldom find.
If you for specimens should hunt
With trunks behind and tails in front,
That hunt would occupy you long;
The force of habit is so strong.

A.E. Housman

Elephanti manus priores, caudas aversas habent.
Perraro caudas priores, aversas videas manus.
Tam novarum bestiarum long sit venatio
Et laboriosa: tanta vis est consuetudinis.

H.H. Huxley

A symmetrical four-word hexameter

praecipua probitate citabimus excellentes,

We shall mention those who excel in outstanding goodness.

The *Apeth* of Indexing *Barbara Hird*

We all use indexes;ⁿ but how are they put together?

If any discipline equips you to be an indexer, it must be the Classics, at least if you are of a generation to have learned Latin prose composition. I became irrevocably hooked on Classics on the day we graduated from sentences to real prose composition. I still remember the excitement of learning that the idea was no longer to produce a literal translation, but a version which told it as Caesar or Tacitus might have done, with considerable latitude in the matter of temporal and logical ordering; a world of unlimited possibilities was opening up before me. Years later, I became hooked on indexing for much the same reason, as the approach which analyses and disassembles the text, re-orders it and puts it back together again from another point of view is common to prose composition and indexing. Unseen translation techniques have their uses too, for coping with the incomprehensible! Both disciplines are a matter of comprehension and analysis, plus the vital factor of seeing the text from a different point

of view; where the classicist tries to get into the mind and style of the chosen author, the indexer must put him – or herself in the place of the potential user of the index. The aim is not just to epitomize the text, but to create a map and provide clues and pointers which will make clear the way into and through the labyrinth.

If the indexer has got properly into the skin of the reader, an index should need no explanation, beyond a note of any particular conventions used (italics for illustrations, bold for major references, and the like); but indexers are inveterate proselytizers. Besides, we tend to be isolated, if not lonely, souls, beavering away at our computers or our shoeboxes full of index cards, and we sometimes like to think that our readers might get more out of our indexes if they knew how they had been put together. So here are the bones of the process.

To start with the easy part, the technicalities; the rules in indexing are few and basic (such as correctness in the use of alphabetical order), the